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ABSTRACT

This report presents the outcomes from two international 1991 conferences, one held in Washington, D.C., and the other in Scotland, which addressed developing a framework for cooperative research in the area of measuring quality in postsecondary education. The first meeting established the foundations for collaborative research and the second picked up where the first left off by correctly outlining the four specific areas of investigation that were identified in Washington. These were: the international assessment of student learning in specific disciplines; the impact of the implementation of quality control or assessment procedures on higher education systems; drop-out, retention, and enrollment patterns of students as they exist in various countries; and peer review as a process of quality control. The document then provides a breakdown of each of these four research areas in terms of: (1) which countries would participate in which areas of research; (2) the level of participation of the researchers in each area; (3) the scope of the research; (4) which researchers will be responsible for project coordination; (5) the investigative models to be used; (6) the research methods to be employed; and (7) sources of funding. A list of participants with their affiliations and addresses is included. (GLR)

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Second International Working Conference on the Measurements of Quality in Postsecondary Education

Proceedings

The National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, & Assessment
The Center for the Study of Higher Education

The Pennsylvania State University
U.S.A.

and

The Center for Higher Education Policy Studies

University of Twente
The Netherlands

Edinburgh, Scotland
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I. Introduction: The May Meeting

Globalization of the marketplace, the workforce and the scientific community has increased interest in the assessment of outcomes and the measurement of quality in higher education. At the national level, governments are responding by establishing policy for system-wide, institutional, programmatic and curricular assessment in the hope of making systems more accountable to their national educational missions. Internationally, researchers are attempting to develop frameworks for the comparison of quality and outcomes in higher education. Given this need, the National Center for Teaching Learning and Assessment (NCTLA) and the Center for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at The Pennsylvania State University sponsored an invitational working conference on May 23-24, 1991 in Washington DC. This meeting stimulated an both an ongoing dialogue and a cooperative research agenda on issues of quality assurance and measurement. Participants from Austria, Canada, Belgium, Mexico, Netherlands, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States exchanged concept papers which articulated their research interests.

Meeting sponsors hoped to capitalize on the interest in educational quality stimulated by the establishment of National Educational Goals in the United States. The National Center and the Center for the Study of Higher Education sought to channel this interest into establishing an international comparative framework for research from which several countries may benefit. This framework would be developed based on cooperative research carried out by consortia of international scholars. Such research will be valuable to all those interested in determining standards of quality relative to other national systems of higher education.

The intent of the initial meeting was to explore the possibility of engaging in various facets of collaborative research which might have to do with issues of quality measurement and higher education. It was the hope of the Center for the Study of Higher Education and the National Center for the Study of Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Penn State University to establish a vehicle to draw upon the strong interest nationally and internationally to examine issues of quality. This strong interest has been made apparent by the various different projects and endeavors already underway internationally.

The first meeting, therefore, was necessary in establishing the foundations for collaborative research in the form of four specific ideas:

1. **International assessment of student learning in specific disciplines.**

2. **The impact of the implementation of quality control or assessment procedures on higher education systems.**

3. **Drop-out, retention, and enrollment patterns of students as they exist in various countries.**

4. **Peer review as a process of quality Control.**

II. The September Meeting

Following May 24 meeting in Washington, the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, The Netherlands, and the Center for the Study of Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University in the United States sponsored a second international meeting on the measurements of quality in higher education at the Napier Polytechnic, in Edinburgh, Scotland on September 5, 1991, immediately following the European Association of Institutional Research conference (EAIR). The September meeting was attended by researchers from Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The purpose of the second meeting was to proceed where the first meeting left off, that is, to concretely outline those research agendas decided upon in Washington and to determine which countries and individuals were to be collaborative research partners. Each of the four research ideas were examined according to the following points:

1. **interest of various parties in particular research endeavors** (not all investigators will be interested in pursuing research in all four areas. Certain researchers may only be interested in undertaking research on one specific topic)

2. **level of participation** (some researchers may want to participate as key investigators on some projects, others may only want to play an advisory role)

3. **scope of research** (investigation on the international, systemic, federal, state or institutional level)

4. **coordination of research** (those researchers who will coordinate the investigation, either on a collaborative or individual basis)

5. **investigative models**

6. **research methods**

7. **sources of funding**

At the outset of the meeting it was assumed that, given the number of individuals participating in the Edinburgh meeting, there would be a varying degree of interest in participation relative to project discussed. The intent of this discussion was, therefore, to bring forth this interest. Several levels of interest were proposed. It was not the presumption of the cosponsors, CSHE, NCTLA or CHEPS to be the principal coordinators of any of these research activities particular. Though both are engaged in research activities related to some or all of the proposed issues, it was not the intent of the sponsors to control or coordinate research proposal development.

There are at least three approaches to outlining participation:

1. **Project coordinators and primary researchers**

   Since there may be individuals who have stronger interest in one or more of the proposals, this individual would carry much more of the responsibility concerning funding and implementation.

2. **Active researchers**

   This would mean that the individual would participate in the design and implementation within his or her home environment, and provide a concomitant portion of funding to carry this out.

3. **Participants**

   A third possibility might be as a site participant in the research, where, instead of accepting the responsibilities of conducting research, the individual may be a site or national liaison setting up interchange with people who are in fact involved in that research. These individuals would seek to help identify the appropriate individuals and institutions with whom one might work in their home countries.

III. Research Proposals

Proposal Number One: International Assessment of Student Learning in Specific Disciplines

Group: Germany, France, U.K., U.S.A., Netherlands, Sweden, Finland.

Purpose: To establish comparability of educational programs in developed nations for the benefits of employers and students.

Scope: Single disciplines (accounting, foreign language, computer science, economics), a cross institutional type, within each country in G-7 countries.

Methods:

- comparisons of textbooks by peers;
- comparisons of examinations by peers;
- comparisons of syllabi by peers;
- definition of core subject areas;
- sample written final examinations in core areas;
- comparisons of enrollment patterns by transcripts of sample students;
- comparisons with employer expectations

Criteria:

- written competencies
- oral competencies
- computer competencies
- statistical and math competencies
- problem-solving and analytic competencies
- content mastering levels
- employer expectations

Outcomes:

- Give contextual understanding of each educational system.
- Determine guidance in maximizing match between student and educational environment in student migration schemes.
- Describe commonality and variations in curriculum.
- Articulate the comparative effects of higher education on students to general public policy.
- Portray the effect of programmatic efforts to increase access on educational quality.

This issue is of particular interest to many researchers involved. The Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in the Netherlands, Hochschul-Informations-System (HIS) in Germany and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in Great Britain have already established a cooperative research project focusing on the discipline of Economics in Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. The National Board of Colleges and Universities in Sweden has just completed an inter-university study of business management. In addition, the National Center for Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Penn State has developed a similar type of inquiry, though it is primarily focused on a non-comparative basis at this point.

This particular proposal suggests that comparative investigation might be established concerning some configuration of developed countries. A different type of research might either include developing countries or focus only on them.

Highlighted in the previous proposal is the difference between international cooperation and competitiveness as two motives for comparison. The particular proposal that is established here is more related to the labor market. It suggests that perhaps the way to make such comparisons is by discipline. This might be done by degree, looking at course or program requirements. There is a series of different ways in which comparison might be made. The criteria that might be employed in looking at those comparisons would be textbooks, student examinations, or course materials.

Important to this discussion, therefore, would be the discussion of:

1. the benefits of making comparisons about learning in a given specific field of study on a comparative basis.

2. whether the fields of accounting, computer science foreign languages and economics are the best suited for this kind of research. (Key to this discussion is the definition of these fields internationally.)

The research objectives discussed were:

1. to investigate better ways of launching such a study. A goal might be to enhance definitional or methodological issues through the sharing of each others investigative results.

2. to determine common elements and analogies within the disciplines in question as well as the differences that exist between the countries and systems involved.

3. to establish communication between faculties in various countries in ways that they previously might not have communicated. What might result from such a study would be the development of channels of communication on an international scale between industry and faculties. In this way, there might be two communication outcomes of this study

Next Steps

Establishment of principle researchers and research group:

CSHE, CNAA and the Swedish National Board of Universities and Colleges will take primary responsibility for this research project.

The primary research facilities will have the responsibility of:

- outlining a research plan of action and gaining consensus from the research group;

- facilitating communication between co-researchers;
- disseminating information between research group and other research units;
- organizing a planning meeting to develop research goals and objectives, determine appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks and overall scope of research;
- meeting will be tentatively planned for Spring of 1992.

Those researchers interested in collaborating in proposal number one should get into contact with: (See Appendix for Complete Addresses.)

- United States: James Ratcliff, Center for the Study of Higher Education
- European Continent: Marianne Bauer, Swedish National Board of Universities and Colleges
- United Kingdom: John Brennan, CNAA

Proposal Number Two: Impact of Quality Assessment on Higher Education System

This second research proposal examines the consequences of the implementation of quality assessment on the different levels of higher education, be it the system in a given country or, in other national instances, higher education at the state or institutional level. At the base level of this analysis, it was suggested that we deal with the procedural issues including: (1) purpose of study; (2) definition of scope in terms of what constitutes quality assessment activity; (3) development of theoretical models; systems to be studied.

Research problem: What is the impact of assessment of assessment on program change? The general model of inference for a research project of QA seen in this light, would be as shown on the chart on the following page. Research questions, derived from this:

1. **Is there any change?** Description of the dependent variables in all countries (with or without QA). Which changes can be discerned in departments regarding the content of study programs/curricula and/or regarding the organizational context of the study programs (staff/faculty, rooms, labs, equipment, etc.)?

2. **Is there a cross-national correlation between scope, amount or rate of changes and the presence of QA?** No matter whether there is or is not such a correlation, the answer to this question requires further research. Namely:

3. **Has the scope, amount or rate of change changed following the introduction of QA?** This question will be applicable or 'researchable' especially in countries where QA procedures have just been introduced.

4. **Which characteristics of QA procedures incite or inhibit changes?** Comparative question, both between different mechanisms within a country (if present) and between countries. One of the characteristics: link to budgets.

5. **How do departmental reactions influence the QA procedures?** Is there any feedback, or are the QA procedures living in a separate world. Especially interesting here is to compare countries with 'young' QA and those with 'old' QA: does QA grow into a bureaucratized phenomenon, safely confined to its own world, without any effects on change in curricula, etc.?

Framework

It was suggested that this problem could be addressed on 3 levels of analyses which work as a framework for the first dimension of an investigation:

1. **what is the impact of quality assessment on the higher education system itself.**

2. **what is the impact of quality assessment on the relationship of the members of the system.**

3. **what is the impact of quality assessment on the upon single institutions.**

Time Dimension

Very few systems with quality assessment programs have had policy in place for any extended period of time. The danger of analyzing such programs is that many have a "halo effect," on the educational system in question. In addition, a particular minister or administrator might be overly enthusiastic about his or her policy, which also tends to influence a study. An solution to this would be to look at quality assessment systems which have been in implementation for varying degrees of time. This would be done in three groups:

1. **Those which have been in existence for more than 10 years.** It is true that looking at those systems limits the field enormously. However, such a study provides a window of examination that would span beyond the administration that implemented the policy. (Potential cases: CNAA, State of Tennesee).

2. **Those which have been in existence for approximately 3 years.** These groups would be representative of operations which would have moved beyond the trials and tribulations of the initial start-up phase of a policy and moved into full operation. (Potential cases: The Netherlands, Academic Audit Unit (UK), several U.S. states).

3. **Those which are at the initial stage of implementation of a quality assessment program.** (Potential cases: Hong Kong, Finland, Mexico).

Next Steps

Establish principle researcher and research group:

- Harold Silver, CSHE
- Don Westerheijden, CHEPS
- John Brennan, CNAA

The primary researchers will have the responsibility of:

- outlining a research plan of action and gaining consensus from the research group;
- facilitating communication between co-researchers;
- disseminating information between research group and other research units;
- organizing a planning meeting to develop research goals and objectives, determine appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks and overall scope of research;

Those researchers interested in collaborating in proposal number one should get into contact with: (Complete Addresses in Appendix.)

- Don Westerheijden, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies
- John Brennan, CNAA
- Harold Silver, Center for the Study of Higher Education

Proposal Number Three:
Drop-out, Retention, and Enrollment Patterns of Students

Scope: The Netherlands, U.S. Germany; (Austria, Mexico)

Given the level of interest in the topic of drop-out, retention and time to degree in many industrialized nations, higher education researchers have taken the initiative to undertake a comparative study to establish a fundamental understanding of these phenomena. This study should help shed light on the problems of time to degree and drop-out relative to not only the individual country in question, but also the global community. Such a study should begin by outlining the fundamental characteristics of each national system, including a discussion of the historical traditions formulating the basic philosophies of higher education as they relate to each society and the labor force.

Framework

The result of this initial analysis will be to develop a theoretical comparative framework based on the interaction of all related issues. This framework will begin by incorporating historically-based philosophical differences in the role of the first degree in each society. The predominance of the ideal of the prescribed general curriculum in American undergraduate studies has a strong influence in shaping how the first degree relates to the American society at large. Similarly, the long-standing Humboldtian philosophy of *Lehr-und Lernfreiheit* (freedom of teaching and learning), undergirds quite a different set of relationships between first degree and German society. In addition, this study will focus on the idea of the first-degree in relation to a comparative analysis of: (1) family and social background, (2) secondary school preparation, (3) selectivity, (4) relative worth within the labor market, (5) costs of first degree, (6) institutional commitment, (7) level of student interaction, and (8) workplace demands. Such a framework should lay the groundwork not only for this project, but also for future research.

Definitions

In designing a cross-national study of drop-out, attrition and retention, it will be first necessary to establish a common definition of the terms as they relate in each country. Drop-out in this study will be conceived as a neutral and descriptive concept without any qualifying overtones. It will be defined as the number of students of a well-defined cohort that does not complete a certain standard study period. Attrition will be considered to be a synonym for drop-out. Retention or completion-rate will be defined as the quantitative complement of drop-out, namely the percentage of students that completes a certain study period. Duration of study will refer to the number of years a student is enrolled before completion of the first degree.

The Nature of the Problem

Three related factors will be considered in determining the nature of the problem: national focus, standpoint of relevant actors, and history of the issues. It is clear that in each country, a different degree of emphasis is placed on duration of study, attrition and retention. In the United States, the literature suggests a predominant interest in attrition. In Germany, duration of study is considered to be the most crucial. In the Netherlands, however, both issues carry importance: while interest formally focused on mainly duration of study, there seems to be a growing interest in the problems of drop-out.

Questions Concerning a Comparative Study on Drop-Out

1. Given the various differences in definition of drop-out relating to systems and societies, what can we hope to gain from an international comparison study on drop-out?

2. What are the theoretical issues concerning drop-out which are valid in an international framework?

3. What systemic and organizational factors should be taken into consideration? Research at the national level, system level, state level, institutional level.

4. What are the sources of data that can be used in investigating drop-out?

Next Steps

Establish principle researcher and research group:

- CSHE and CHEPS will take primary responsibility for this research project in possible collaboration with Hans Pechar from Austria and Felipe Rizo from Mexico

CSHE and CHEPS as the primary research facilities will therefore have the responsibility of:

- Outlining a research plan of action and gaining consensus from the research group;

- Facilitating communication between co-researchers;

- Disseminating information between research group and other research units;

- Organizing a planning meeting to develop research goals and objectives, determine appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks and overall scope of research;

- Meeting will be tentatively planned for Spring of 1992.

Those researchers interested in collaborating in proposal number one should get into contact with:

- Michael Nugent, Center for the Study of Higher Education
- Stefanie Schwarz, Center for the Study of Higher Education
- Reikele Bijleveld, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies

The Role of Peer Review in the Evaluation/Assessment Process

(John Brennan, CNAA)

Rationale

Much used and valued within higher education, peer review is sometimes viewed as suspect by those outside of it. The project would attempt to identify the conditions under which peer review achieves maximum external and internal legitimacy.

Modalities of Peer Review

Modalities of Peer Review	
1. Source of Authority	▸ peer community ▸ institutional management ▸ external bureaucracy
2. Type of Peer	▸ subject community ▸ institutional community ▸ bureaucratically-sponsored group
3. Selection of Peers	▸ the 'reviewees' ▸ the peer group ▸ the bureaucrats
4. Aims of Review	▸ summative ▸ formative ▸ summative/formative
5. Focus of Review	▸ intentions ▸ achievements ▸ procedures
6. Reportage	▸ private/agreed ▸ public/agreed ▸ private/reviewers only ▸ public/reviewers only

Differences in approach to peer review can be found along the following dimensions:

Sources of Authority

The peer community must always be the ultimate source of (moral) authority in peer review. But in practice that authority may be underpinned or undermined by a linkage to internal managerial or external bureaucratic authorities (e.g. research councils, accreditation bodies).

1. Types of Peers. Typically taken to refer to an inter(national) subject community, there are also examples of peers being non-subject colleagues in the same institution. Depending on the focus of review, the peer group may be part of a 'real' academic community or be specially constructed by an internal or external bureaucracy. At its loosest, the term 'peer' refers to other academics or professionals. (Q: could employers be regarded as peers?). There are also variations in status equivalences--peers may be of equal or higher status (but never lower?) than those under review. Is a peer defined more by the kind of relationship entered into--and a 'correct' set of attitudes--rather than by objective status characteristics?

2. Selection of Peers. This can be crucial to the integrity and hence the legitimacy of the process. There can be difficulty in squaring external and internal legitimacy here. Peers are colleagues and competitors and both characteristics can create big problems!

3. Aims of Review. More than other forms of quality assessment, peer review can have major formative influences through information exchange and the legitimacy of the judgements reached. Peer review can provoke 'voluntary' change and improvement. When, however, summative judgements are linked to decisions of funding or accrediting bodies, influence is of a 'harder' sort. Can summative and formative approaches be combined successfully? How can game-playing and compliance cultures be avoided?

4. Focus of Review. The availability of information to support peer review is important here. Information about intentions and procedures is often more readily available than information about achievements.

5. Reportage. It is the last of the four possibilities that produces the most threat to the reviewers. It is the first of these which produces the most skepticism among external audiences.

Academic Autonomy

A final dimension are the traditions concerning the regulation of academic work in particular institutions and countries. What are the expectations of lay or political accountability? How free are individual academics in their teaching and research? If freedom is constrained, who by?

A Possible Project

Summary. By literature search and interviews, the work of peer review agencies could be analyzed along dimensions of the kind set out above. This essentially mapping exercise would need to be linked to some criteria of effectiveness. This could be achieved in a variety of ways--e.g. decision analysis (Are tough decisions taken? Are they explained/justified? Are they appealed against?), measures of legitimacy (interviews with interested parties, internal and external), measures of change or effectiveness (Are recommendations implemented?) The aim would be to identify the characteristics of peer review that are associated with its maximum effectiveness.

Scope. To encompass the variety of peer review procedures, a reasonable number of agencies would need to be examined. This would imply more than ten but, in order to be manageable, fewer than twenty. Should the study be limited to reasonably established agencies where operations are 'bedded in'? Should it include both research funding and institutional/program accreditation and review?

Next Steps

Establish principle researcher and research group:

- John Brennan of the CNAA will take primary responsibility in collaboration with ACE, University of Maryland and Cheps.

- The primary research facility will therefore have the responsibility of:

  - outlining a research plan of action and gaining consensus from the research group;
  - facilitating communication between co-researchers;
  - disseminating information between research group and other research units;
  - organizing a planning meeting to develop research goals and objectives, determine appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks and overall scope of research;

Those researchers interested in collaborating in proposal number one should get into contact with:

- John Brennan, Council for National Academic Awards

V. A Look Ahead

There was general consensus at the close of the Edinburgh meeting that the next stage in the process in pursuing cooperative research in outcomes assessment and quality measurement was to set up concrete research consortia focusing on issues discussed. The intention of these proceedings is to provide a summary of the four research ideas developed at May meeting in Washington and the September meeting in Edinburgh. This document provides a record of the issues discussed. It is not, therefore, the intention of this document to outline concrete research proposals, but rather summarize that which was discussed and indicate those steps to be taken. It is now up to the principle researchers and the prospective research groups to proceed with the stages outlined after each proposal. Those researchers wishing to participate in any way should contact the principle researchers at the addresses provided in the appendix.

It is the hope of the cosponsors that the developing international research network will continue to foster collaboration and communication among all of the members. Primary researchers should take the responsibility of dissemination of information to members of their research groups and to other primary researchers. Research proposals for each project should be available by early 1992 for dissemination to all interested parties.

Participants at the September Meeting

Trudy Banta
The University of Tennessee
1819 Andy Holt Towers
Knoxville, TN 37996
Phone: (615) 974-2350
Fax: (615) 974-2712

Marianne Bauer
National Board of Universities
& Colleges
Box 45501
10403 Stockholm
Sweden

John Brennan
CNAA
344 54 Gray S Inn Road
London WCIX 8BP
United Kingdom
Phone: 071-278-4411
Fax: 071-833-1012

Edgar Frackmann
Hochschul-Informations-System
BP 2920
3000 Hannover
Germany
Fax: 49-511-1220-250

Robert Froh
Syracuse University
Testing Services
209 Archbold Gym
Syracuse, NY 13244
Phone: (315) 443-2295
Fax: (315) 443-1524
Bitnet: ReFROH @ SUVM

Leo Goedegebuure
University of Twente
C.H.E.P.S.
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340-392
E-Mail:
GOEDEBUUR @ UTWENTE.NL

Kari Hyppoenen
University of Turku
20500 Turku
Finland

Derek Jamieson
University of Guelph 4th Floor
Guelph, Ontario
NIG 2W1
Canada
Phone: (519) 824-4120 (X3456)
Fax: (519) 767-1693
Bitnet: ANPDEREK @ UOQUELPH

Peter Maassen
University of Twente, CHEPS
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340-392
Bitnet: MAAS @ UTWENTE.NL

Aims McGuinness
Education Commission of the States
707 17th Street, Suite 2700
Denver, CO 80202
Phone: (303) 299-3614
Fax: (303) 296-8332

Michael Nugent
Center for the Study of Higher Education
The Pennsylvania State University
403 South Allen Street, Suite 115
University Park, PA 16801-5252
Phone: (814) 863-0854
Fax: (814) 865-3638
Bitnet: MAN114@PSUVM

James Ratcliff
Director and Professor
Center for the Study of Higher Education
The Pennsylvania State University
403 South Allen Street, Suite 104
University Park, PA 16801-5252
Phone: (814) 865-6347
Fax: (814) 865-3638
Bitnet: JLR7@PSUVM

Allan Sensicle
Executive Director
Hong Kong Council for Acadademic
Accreditation
14/F. Ruttonjee House
11 Duddell Street, Central
Hong Kong
Phone: 801-7480
Fax: 845-9910
E-mail: HKCAA in care of CPHKVX.

Frank Schmidtlein
University of Maryland
Room 4114 CSS Building
College Park, MD 20742

Jose Strubbe
University Gent
St. Pietersnieuwstraat 25
9000 Gent
Belgium
Phone: 091-64-30-37
Fax: 091-64-35-97

Dr. Don Westerheijden
University of Twente, CHEPS
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340392
E-mail: WESTERH @ UTWENTE.NL

Peter Weusthof
University of Twente, CHEPS
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340392

Additional Participants

Reikele Bijleveld
University of Twente, CHEPS
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340392

Jeffrey Gilmore
OERI Office of Research
Higher Education & Adult Learning
Room 6158 Capitol Place
555 New Jersey Ave.
Washington, DC 20208-5647
Phone: (202) 219-2254
Fax: (202) 219-2030
Bitnet: GI2 @ NIHCU

Steven Hunt
OERI Office of Research
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20208-5647
Phone: (202) 219-2253
Fax: (202) 219-2030

Felipe Martinez Rizo
Univ. Autonoma de Aguascalientes
San Cosme N 108
Aguascalientes
20010 Mexico
Phone: 49-14-20-29
Fax: 49-14-55-91

Hans Pechar
Ministry of Education and Science
Bankgasse 1
A 1010
Vienna, Austria

Gary Pike
The Center for Assessment Research
& Development
University of Tennessee
1819 Andy Holt Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37996-4350
Phone: (615) 974-2350
Fax: (615) 974-2712
Bitnet: PA108968 @ UTKVM1

Stefanie Schwarz
Center for the Study of Higher Education
The Pennsylvania State University
403 South Allen Street, Suite 115
University Park, PA 16801-5252
Phone: (814) 863-0854
Fax: (814) 865-3638

Michel van Buchem
University of Twente, CHEPS
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Phone: 31-53-893263
Fax: 31-53-340392

Franz Van Der Meer
Rotterdam Inst. for Higher Education
Rochussenstraat 125, 3015 EJ
Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: 010-4361233
Fax: 010-4367033

Maryellen Weimer
Center for the Study of Higher Education
The Pennsylvania State University
403 South Allen Street, Suite 104
University Park, PA 16801-5252
Phone: (814) 865-8366
Fax: (814) 865-3638
Bitnet: GRG@PSUVM

David Woodhouse
Executive Director (Acting)
Hong Kong Council for Academic
Accreditation
14/F. Ruttonjee House
11 Duddell Street, Central
Hong Kong
Phone: 801-7480
Fax: 845-9910
E-mail: HKCAA in care of CPHKVX.